

Exodus 23:20-24

“The Angel Guarding the People of Israel”

“Behold, I am going to send an angel before you to guard you along the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Be on your guard before him and obey his voice; do not be rebellious toward him, for he will not pardon your transgression, since My name is in him. But if you truly obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. For My angel will go before you and bring you in to the land of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will completely destroy them. You shall not worship their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their deeds; but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their *sacred* pillars in pieces.”

Early in the wilderness experience of Ancient Israel, God proper confirms His intention to lead His people into the Promised Land (Exodus 23:23b), although there are certainly conditions associated with them not adopting the worship practices of the present residents (Exodus 23:24-25). The Lord prefaces this direction with the strict admonition that a distinct figure or entity is going to go before them, for their protection (Exodus 23:20), which they are to obey (Exodus 23:21-22a), causing the enemies of Israel to be defeated (Exodus 23:23b). The identity and functions of this entity bear some questions for later probing into the identity of Yeshua the Messiah, as there are various areas of overlap and agreement.

The Lord decrees, *hinneih anokhi sholeiach malakh l'fanekha* (הִנֵּנִי אֲנֹכִי שֹׁלֵחַ מַלְאָךְ לְפָנֶיךָ), “Look, I am about to send a messenger before you” (Exodus 23:20a, Alter). Many conclude that this *malakh* (מַלְאָךְ) or messenger/angel, is a supernatural intermediary between God proper and the people of Israel. Alter actually notes how “modern rationalist commentators have sought to explain this as a divine metaphor for providential guidance,”⁶⁴ as some liberal examiners might dismiss the concept of any supernatural figure being actually present with Ancient Israel, to guide and protect them. Contrary to this would be the thought of Durham, who interjects, “however the combination Yahweh/Yahweh’s messenger came about, the ‘messenger’ here is the equivalent of Yahweh himself, thus another way of indicating Yahweh’s presence.”⁶⁵ In the Torah, there are surely encounters with a figure designated as either *malakh YHWH* or *malakh Elohim*, speaking in the first person “I” as God proper. So, is the *malakh* or messenger/angel described in Exodus 23:20-24 this same figure, God specifically manifesting Himself as a messenger/angel?

Key inquiries are certainly raised in God’s word to the Israelites, “Pay heed to him and obey him. Do not defy him, for he will not pardon your offenses, since My Name is in him” (Exodus 23:21, NJPS), *ki sh'mi b'qirbo* (כִּי שְׁמִי בְּקִרְבּוֹ). The figure of the *malakh* or messenger/angel is said to specifically bear God’s *shem* (שֵׁם) or “name,” which all readers will conclude as designating how this entity surely possesses significant power and authority authorized from God. Sarna as a Jewish commentator concludes, “The Divine Will and Power manifests itself through his heaven-sent messenger.”⁶⁶ Martin Noth makes the point, “The ‘angel’ is the ambassador of Yahweh...who represents Yahweh himself and in whom Yahweh himself is present...Israel must behave towards the angel as though he were Yahweh himself.”⁶⁷ Many will take the *malakh* or messenger/angel to be an authorized, albeit a most significantly authorized, agent of God proper, an entity to be

⁶⁴ Alter, *Five Books of Moses*, 452.

⁶⁵ Durham, 335.

⁶⁶ Sarna, *Exodus*, 148.

⁶⁷ Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 193.

effectively treated as God Himself, although most probably created. Without saying too much, all Brevard S. Childs notes is “the virtual identification of the angel with God himself.”⁶⁸

Readers of the Gospels, when seeing “My name is in him” (Exodus 23:21), might very well be prompted to consider Yeshua the Messiah’s statement, “I have come in My Father’s name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, you will receive him” (John 5:43). Yeshua does not present Himself as just some singular actor, pushing His own, self-serving agenda. On the contrary, the Lord would say, “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45; also Matthew 20:28). The Messiah bears the name or authority of His Father, and has been authorized by Him to perform critical salvation-historical tasks, the same as the figure of the *malakh* or messenger/angel who would bear God’s name, leading Ancient Israel into the Promised Land. It is hardly a surprise why various evangelical Christian resources have noted this scene, and have gone to the extent that some pre-Incarnate manifestation of Yeshua is likely in view. In the estimation of *TWOT*,

“In some passages *shēm Yahweh* is so inextricably bound up with the being of God, that it functions almost like an appearance of Yahweh (Exo 23:20-21; Isa 30:27). Cf. the tabernacling of the Name at various spots almost like a Christophany (Exo 20:24; Deut 12:5; 2Sam 7:13, etc.).”⁶⁹

In the dialogue of Exodus 23:22, where it is clear that God proper is speaking, it is recorded, *ki im-shamo’a tish’ma b’qolo v’asi’ta kol asher adabbeir* (כִּי אִם-שָׁמוֹעַ תִּשְׁמַע בְּקוֹלוֹ וְעָשִׂיתָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר אֲדַבֵּר), “now if to-listen you-listen to-voice-of-him and-you-do all that I-say” (Kohlenberger).⁷⁰ The dialogue has God speaking in the first person, on behalf of this *malakh* or messenger/angel: “but if you obey him and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes” (Exodus 23:22, NJPS). If this *malakh* or messenger/angel were only a standard, supernatural intermediary, then God speaking in the third person for this figure would instead have been expected, something like: “But if you truly obey his voice and do all that *he* says, then *he* will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries” (Exodus 23:22, modified NASU).

It should not be surprising, for further evaluation of the origins and identity of Yeshua the Messiah, for scenes such as Exodus 23:20-25 to be considered, as the *malakh* or messenger/angel is an entity sent by God proper, but then represents God proper in the first person “I,” when exclusive references in the third person would be more natural to expect. A commentator like Peter Enns is reserved in his conclusion, “Regardless of the mystery surrounding his precise identity and despite the fact that he is not frequently mentioned in Exodus, he is no doubt a central figure in Israel’s redemption. And when we keep in mind the virtual equation of the angel and Yahweh, it follows that the angel’s presence is an indication of God’s presence with his people from beginning to end.”⁷¹ Far be it from the identity of Yeshua the Messiah to be considered from either Ancient Near Eastern or classical mythology—as a god or goddess comes down from the sky to perform some task—Tanach accounts of the *malakh* or messenger/angel authorized from God, and virtually indistinguishable from God Himself, need to be considered for evaluating activities of Yeshua in the first person “I” as God.

⁶⁸ Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 487; noting Genesis 20:15ff; Judges 6:11ff.

⁶⁹ Walter C. Kaiser, “אֲדַבֵּר,” in *TWOT*, 2:934.

⁷⁰ Kohlenberger, 1:210.

⁷¹ Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), pp 473-474.